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BLACK GOLD: trustworthiness in artistic research (seen from the sidelines of arts and health)

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**The shape my mouth makes when I
speak the word rigour seems cruel,
lips pushed forward then flopping
back to make a guttural g sound.**

Rigour plays a central role in contemporary research culture. But how appropriate a concept is it to think, perform, and make judgements with on what is trustworthy and excellent in artistic research and its neighbouring field of arts and health?

The historical meanings of rigour suggest severity and rigidity: straight lines, austere habits, privations. As a word, rigour has a mixed ancestry – French, Latin, Middle English. Some of its earliest uses coincide with a feudal system of government in Europe, with *rigge* [verb] meaning to plough a straight line in a narrow strip, and *rig* [verb] to provide a straight ridge to a house. *Rig* [noun] a derivation of ridge, was used in England five hundred years ago of human and animal backbones, perhaps reflecting everyday physical burdens. *Rigours* [noun] conveyed the meting out of un-cautioned punishments and cruelty.

While the temperament of rigour might be appropriate for research that follows pre-set norms and standards of repeatability, its use to judge what is trustworthy in artistic research is questionable. Though artistic researchers need to understand the rigour concept, by contrast, artistic research as a kind of ‘thinking through making’ (Ravetz, 2011, 159; Ingold, 2013, 6), places value on improvisation, chance encounter, unforeseen admixture and the in- and outward- folding of process, affect and material. Once it is accepted that poiesis is part of the research process (Ingold, 2013; Haraway, 2016), it becomes apparent that artistic research cannot easily accommodate straight backed rigour.

Poiesis in artistic research corresponds with multispecies kinship, decomposition, layering, digestion and prodigious storying that feeds artistic knowledge-making in different combinations and degrees in different places and times.

Narrative, says Sarah Worth (2008, 49), is the representation of at least two events with a unified subject, a retrievable temporal order and an explanatory gap that needs to be filled by the reader. While discursive reasoning takes the shape of a well-formed argument that appeals to procedures that establish empirical and formal truths (Bruner, 1986, 11), narrative lines of reasoning ‘do not generally prove anything, but they do show how something might have come to be the case’ (Worth, 2008, 49).

Narrative is more than what is wrapped around data to ensure its safe arrival or easy digestion however; it is an involution that through gaps in explanation draws multiple listeners and speakers into its orbit. It has the potential, as Martha Nussbaum suggests, to speak horizontally, across difference, but also ‘vertically, giving the reader experience that is deeper, sharper and more precise than much of what takes place in life.’ (1990, 48)

The telling (counting) of telling (storying) matters, because the telling (storying) is knowledge-making.

In her book *Staying with the Trouble*, where to trouble is to stir up, to cloud, Haraway (2016), follows and extends Strathern’s characterisation of anthropology as relations that study relations, by writing

It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories (Haraway, 2016, 12).

In a compote of discursive and narrative reasoning this telling claims kinship with research poiesis, literary ethnographies, speculative feminisms, string figuring and sensuous oddkin epistemologies.¹ With gaps and fissures it seeks to stir what can be valued and trusted in artistic research through the drawing out, looping around, tensioning and slackening off of storytelling.

BLACK GOLD HAILED AS THE NEW GOLD STANDARD IN ARTISTIC & ARTS AND HEALTH RESEARCH!

In artistic research, to obediently follow the rigour concept is to create an unnavigable passage for the *speaking assembled* - the organisms, voices and soundings that squeeze, slide and swarm through the illusory singular person of the artistic researcher.

When the roof of research is held up by a straight ridge and the surrounding fields ploughed in unwavering narrow ridges and lines and people and animals carry weight on their backs, there is a danger that the rotting, growing, involuting tumult of death and being that permeates experience will be overlooked, ignored, lied about or sent underground.

A colleague discussed the difficulty of levering his research process into the rigour category. Part of his method, with good results, was to stay up late in the studio drinking.

'Tis a Field of a Huge Latitude that the Devil has to Dance [...] in.

Sir Roger L'Estrange, 1699, 301.

When academic writing and thinking become laboured, dry, predictable, lack lustre, then what is longed for and can be prepared for, but not directly summonsed, is an 'otherwise' channelling.

William Blake experienced this as 'taking dictation' and Jen Hadfield as 'a poem that comes from behind'. Most poems, Hadfield says (during an Arvon writing workshop I attend in 2014), are made in the hard work of turning up again and again and again. This is how it is and has to be. But very occasionally, through something like an act of grace, a poem arrives fully formed.

Rigour can occlude the artistic research process. Artistic research as poesis happens in what Donald Winnicott calls me-not-me spaces, its character relational, transitional, fragmented, intuitive, counter-intuitive, exacting and messy (or possibly none of these). Artistic research challenges common-sense categorisations and material divisions. Requiring latitude, it exists for the most part at a different angle to rigour.

I got to poking around in the rigour pile because of the Research Excellence Framework (REF)² and its impact on artistic research in the UK through its task of measuring publically funded research against the criteria of originality, rigour and significance. While originality and significance have some legibility for artistic research, rigour requires more than a small squeeze to fit in.

Graeme Sullivan (2006, 20) mentions that artistic research must be as rigorous as science and social science, but differently so. Art moves from unknown to known, he explains, fosters rather than avoids unintended consequences, and knows what it comes to know in and through the play of materials, context and critique.

I thought more about rigour during a research project with recoverists called *Wonderland; the art of becoming human* which took place in Manchester in 2016.³ Recoverism seeks to reframe and humanise the lived experience of substance misuse and/or mental distress away from biomedical models, pathologies and criminalization (Ravetz, forthcoming; cf. *A Recoverist Manifesto*). The desire was to put artistic research into conversation with art and recovery. From the side lines of arts and health where we were situated, I saw that when artistic research comes into contact with arts and health norms, there is an imperceptible clash of cultures.

In arts and health, the contribution artists make is usually characterised as professional practice. Artists working in the area are known from the health side as practitioners, not researchers. Only exceptionally are artists treated as knowledge-formers, as for example in research by Sarah Atkinson and Mary Robson on arts interventions in primary schools where arts practitioners were enrolled as 'both researchers and informants, enjoined to provide a reflexive and detailed account of each session at the time' (Atkinson and Robson, 2012, 1353).

In arts and health, the gold standard for evidence-based research is the randomised control trial (RCT). As arts and health researcher Daisy Fancourt (2017, 200) acknowledges, despite calls to open up arts and health research to other kinds of methodology and measure, in her experience:

Researchers and commissioners within healthcare and medicine will generally look to these experimental methods as the best form of evidence (and attempting to change that would require a seismic shift). (Fancourt, 2017, 200).

But since artistic research begins with the unknown and requires latitude, the problem of rigour is more than one of difference. Rigour evokes a backbone of accountability when what's to be accounted for in artistic research is a troubling, a stirring.

What happens to the latitude of the arts in arts and health in the shadow of experimental methods such as randomised control trials, often considered the gold standard of biomedical sciences?

Nonetheless, given the material joining, latitude, making and unmaking of artistic research, a more fitting metaphor for excellence might be black gold [aka compost]. In a research excellence audit four black gold stars **** would signify world leading research shown to move away from pre-determined protocols in favour of rotting, digestive processes and companion species.

Black gold presents a live alternative to the use of the 'gold standard' to signify what is reliable in artistic research. Gold is suggestively paradoxical given that as a material it is malleable and changeable, contradicting its status as a guarantor of reliability.

Gold's malleable qualities may explain why *aurum metallicum* is used in homeopathic medicine to remedy 'extreme depression, overly high standards, the perception of living in a dark, isolated and joyless space, and despairing or suicidal feelings.' (Lilley, n.d.)

I was prescribed homeopathic aurum in my twenties. It lifted me out of a suicidal depression in a matter of minutes. I was suffering in part from a perfectionism that I would later discover feeds academic as well narcotic affliction. Whether or not this change was the effect of a placebo, I responded to the virtual/minature dose of gold with perceptible changes to my body.

Gold is affecting, auratic and responsive which makes it an odd icon for the experimental scientific method believed to deliver unbending rigour. Esther Leslie (2005, 87) conveys the central place gold has in Marx's aesthetic materialism as a natural object that magically gains social properties. With the 'depletion of natural resources comes the depletion of human potential, but also a magical, transformative act of the social upon the natural: making gold into money' (Efstathiou, 2010).

Michael Taussig (2004) attends to these same properties when he models his make-believe Cocaine Museum on the Gold Museum in Bogotá, drawing parallels between the tricking of human perception, the museum's failure to show the reality of African slave lives on whose labour the gold market depended for over four hundred years and the situation of Afro-Colombian miners drawn to the cocaine trade on the Pacific coast, part of a modern cycle of drugs, to money, to gold, to money (2004, 14).

In homeopathy, a constitutional affliction can run through kin, which is perhaps why as a child my daughter would become enraged if upon arriving at the beach the sand was not golden.

Taking her to her new job as crew on a sail training vessel early in 2018 we saw the sun glitter briefly on a small wet stretch of pebbly sand at Lee-over-Sands. Lee is a tiny lesson in the encounter between a regime of rigour and one of vernacular poiesis and composting.

Residents at Lee-over-Sands were once asked how they used the seashore. After ticking various options, in the free text box someone wrote 'tree-hugging.'

Winds whips round the Essex coast and only coarse grasses such as false oat-grass [*Arrhenatherum elatius*], cock's-foot [*Dactylis glomerata*]

and sea couch [*Elytrigia atherica*] thrive there.

A *Telegraph* magazine article features an artist and coffin designer whose shack at Lee-over-Sands sports a coffin that doubles up as a wardrobe.

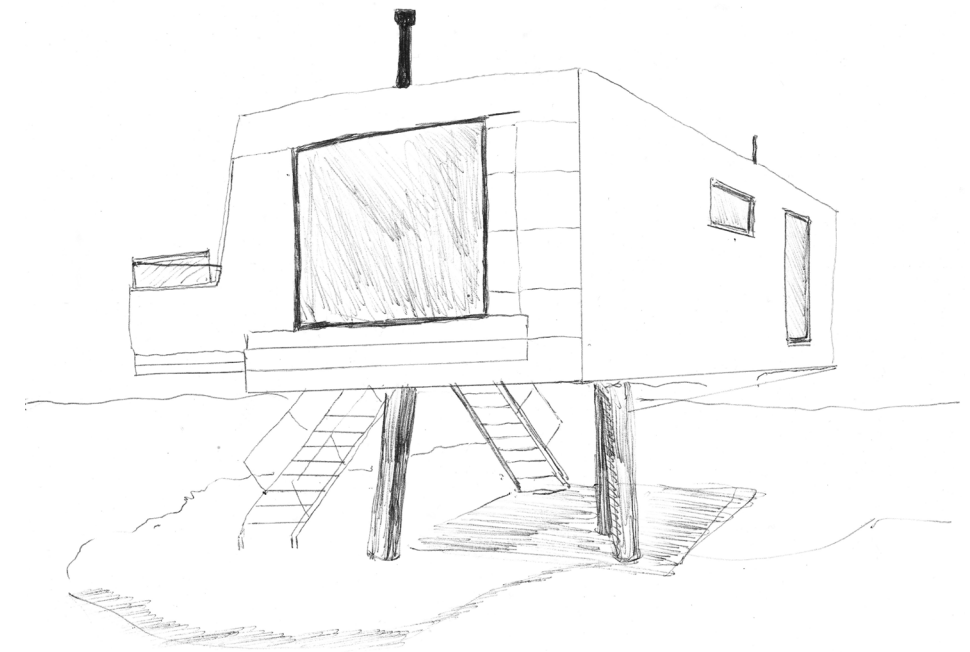
I imagined her dragging driftwood from the shoreline, hugging it to her chest.

Lee-over-Sands began in the 1930s as a holiday resort for working class Londoners. Early in 2018 there was a thin line of concrete and wooden shacks, some with crumbling plaster walls gaffer-taped together.

One bears the name *Mania*; manikin heads and driftwood objects jostle at the windows.

A few metres along, three architect-designed houses intervene amongst the smaller plots, their high spec designs distinguishing them from their sand wind rain sea concrete gaffer taped kin.

There are no trees on the marshes.



Wonderland was a research project in Manchester in partnership with Mark Prest, the founding director of Portraits of Recovery (PORe), and a group of people in recovery, some of whom described themselves as affiliates to the emerging recoverist movement spearheaded by *A Recoverist Manifesto*.

RCTs were never mooted as part of *Wonderland* which wasn't set up as an arts intervention. But the lack of discussion about rigour in artistic research was unsettling, placing *Wonderland*, its research artefacts (a website and film) and the emphasis in the project on lived experience and storytelling, at risk of seeming 'merely' anecdotal.

We should resist the temptation to assume that since stories are stories they are, in some sense, unreal or untrue, for this is to suppose that the only real reality, or true truth, is one in which we, as living, experiencing beings, can have no part at all (Ingold, 1993:153).

Daisy Fancourt, author of *Arts in Health, Designing and Researching Interventions* (2017) declares herself open to Mike White's request that in the diverse field of arts and health

We must not stifle the emergent vision and potential by only seeking a proven evidence base for arts in health that is narrowly defined through "control" based interventions (White, cited in Fancourt, 2017).

and also to Clive Parkinson's more openly iconoclastic opposition to a standardized tool-kit,

a one-size-fits-all panacea that can be branded and sold on (Parkinson, cited in Fancourt, 2017).

Fancourt, in line with current protocols, appeals to rigour as the final arbiter, suggesting that those who espouse non-control-based interventions need to get real about what biomedical science and government policy finds trustworthy, useful and acceptable. The problem I see with this is that when held up as if it is rigour's antithesis, creativity as something made up, radically empirical, or openly fanciful, is by the same token demoted. If art, literary anthropology and other brands of storytelling and experiential knowledge are fanciful, then arguably this is their greatest strength, for as discussions about narrative suggest,

and as John Carey underlines in *What is Art For?* (2005), the value of art has as much to do with how gaps and indistinctness allow for things to be known differently through imaginative, participatory, connective encounters, as it does with empirical factuality.

As it turns out, increasing numbers of social scientists, economists and clinical practitioners are interested in effecting a shift away from RCTs as the gold standard for excellent research in arts and health and related areas, by painstakingly unpicking assumptions and challenging the wisdom that 'controls' are beyond reproach (Deaton and Cartwright, 2018). But while these challenges make the case for other, usually qualitative research methodologies and measures of excellence, they don't yet extend to artistic research where what is at stake is less deciding on 'the right method for the job' and more on what the job of research in the arts and in arts and health is, and could be.

~~Follow the grund of your pretice.~~

To know from the inside, writes Tim Ingold, is to join with things themselves 'in the very processes of thought' ----- it is not to engineer confrontations between theories in the head and facts on the ground (2017,5).

3RD YEAR UNDERGRADUATE ART STUDENT: (*Looks behind*)
I'm worried how I'll manage when I leave here.

**TUTOR: (*Exhales*) Learn to follow the
ground of your practice**

When my daughter left school, she sailed across the Atlantic, via the Caribbean, to Cuba, South America and then across the Pacific to New Zealand. She followed a raw desire for unknown experiences, having never sailed before. I struggled with a sense of losing her to a world of which I also knew nothing.

Going from unknown to known differs from the standard version of how to perform rigorous research which holds that the researcher must know what has already become known, identify a gap in this knowledge by scoping the field, formulate what is to be found out through research questions, aims and objectives, show where an enquiry will contribute something new, use appropriate methodology and methods to achieve this and point to the 'findings' that are likely to be identified.

Granted, something of this has to happen in artistic research too, especially when carried out in the academy, and a notion of coordinates and protocols matters (where you have come from, where you are going, what has already been said and done, what difference makes a difference and where?). But it is vital to acknowledge that for much artistic research the picture of a purposeful linear movement from known to unknown to new knowing is illusory.

Over four years sailing and the *speaking-assembled* became woven into her.

...The coral reefs are dead. What was once the most biodiverse ecosystem on our planet, a mind blowing parade of colour, life and strangeness, is now a graveyard of bleached, dead coral. The fish carry a poisonous alga, *Sigatera*, which causes mild to horrific symptoms in humans when consumed, often lasting for months, sometimes resulting in death. The El Niño effect has been the strongest and longest in 25 years, causing the temperature of the sea to further damage the reefs, as they are incredibly sensitive to changes in water temperature. *Sigatera* has spread like wild fire due to these changes to the local ecology. In addition, the islands' profitable, small scale, black pearl farming has been destroyed, as the pearls won't grow anymore. Only coconuts grow on this atoll, and there are precious few opportunities for hunting here. The basic livelihood of the population is being lost. On top of that, increases in the prices of imported food (which is already incredibly expensive) and the increase and unpredictability of hurricanes, and rising sea levels, all make these atolls painfully vulnerable. In fact, these effects are felt all throughout the Pacific; every group of islands is experiencing these drastic changes in the environment.

I sit here in our modern boat, crammed with the luxuries of civilization. We have just watched a film called *Planet Ocean*. Video shots of reefs, endless in colour, filled the screen. These reefs should be surrounding us in glorious abundance. That world of wonder should be filling us up every day as we float, snorkeling, through the waters. Instead, our masks are met with brittle skeletons. All that is left.

No words can add to the situation we find ourselves in on earth. Analysis, in my view, goes round in circles. Destruction and suffering is filling every corner. The majority of people don't know and can't see what is happening.

And yet, nature shows us how in destruction, in death, new life arises.

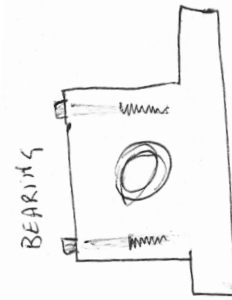
Meanwhile, keeping things light moment to moment is just as important as taking in the weight of these deadly things. We laugh and joke on our floating island, and everything is changing, flowing like a river. I dream about home, about family. Love is as tender and as vulnerable as these tiny atolls.

(Letter from my daughter, Pacific Ocean, 2016)

Straight line purposefulness, unsuited to artistic research, might also be unequal to the sciences as Ingold's essay suggests (this volume). His biologist father was open to wonder, to oddness and beauty, to being changed by strands of multitudinous life and decay that slipped through and about him.

PROPOSITION ONE: Rigour of the kind seen in the controlled scientific experiment that produces data sets of the highest standing. Trust in other researchers being able to use the same methods to turn up the same data again.

PROPOSITION TWO: Research as an ongoing often unpredictable ontogeny of vitally connected correspondence told through situated, aesthetically attuned storying. Trustworthy in as much as it turns something around, makes it differently comprehensible.



...our primary focus should not be on the ontologies of things but on their ontogenies...
(Ingold, 2017:13)

My daughter was on the homebound leg of her journey when I went to meet her boat, docked temporarily in Dublin. I was touched momentarily by everywhere she had been, all she had gathered and shed when she handed me a small plastic bag of books and clothes for safekeeping.

A few days earlier I had been in Manchester presenting on *Wonderland* at the launch of the All Parliamentary Party Group inquiry on Arts, Health and Wellbeing.⁴ I finished the presentation by saying: 'of all the different forms of knowledge I try to practice as an academic, feeling is by far the hardest kind'.

Although these words were written down in my notes, when they came out of my mouth they seemed to me shameful, abject.

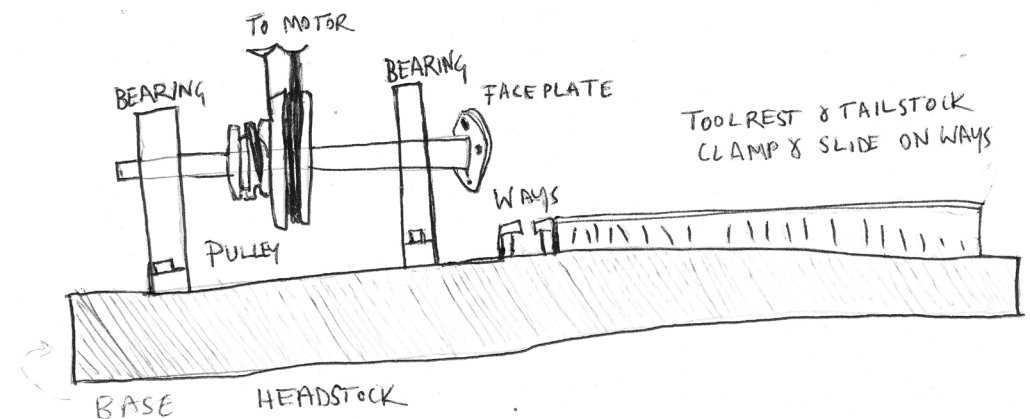
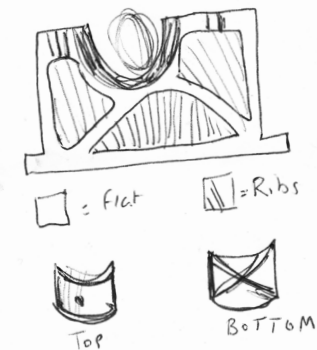
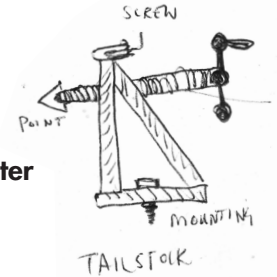
In the adult world [...] spontaneous eruptions from our interior (gestures, sounds, slips of the tongue) incite embarrassment and repulsion.
(Alsadir 2017, 17-18)

At the top of the bag my daughter gave me for safekeeping was a thin book called *Recovery: A Guide for Adult Children of Alcoholics*. It had a battered card cover and was printed on paper

that had blotted and discoloured. She told me later she had seen it in a second-hand shop in New Zealand and bought it for me but was too shy to give it to me directly. Over fifty passages in the first six chapters were marked by a previous owner in yellow highlighter pen that had seeped through the cheap paper to the other side. The introduction warned that children of alcoholics have difficulty feeling.

I thought of my father, often drunk, sometimes aggressive, on this day sober and deeply melancholy.

He was in his workshop using the lathe. I watched the spinning bole of wood being peeled by the chisel. The workshop doors were flung wide, crisp air was stirring dried leaves on the workshop floor and unexpectedly, for a long moment, something lifted and opened into the space around me. Life multiplied, dispersed, hung suspended like mica.



What can be learnt by communicating from ‘inside’ experience and by joining with things themselves in the very processes of thinking?

Can we meet the necessary requirements for trustworthiness but resist the distortion of art, with its need for latitude, by standardised notions of rigour? Can we assert the value and validity of lived experience in academic endeavour, maintaining correspondence with felt vitality through narrative reasoning and storytelling?

Artistic research when it enters the field of arts and health is not at its best claiming to understand *something* – a set of facts newly known, the gathering of evidence for changes to be made, justified by cost benefits. It is best approached as a lateral act of narrative reasoning with gappy bits and caesuras, a turning up and turning around to give and to take dictation, a narrative making and reasoning indistinct enough to carry felt knowledge and lived experience to and from and with the *speaking-assembled*.

Supervising art and design doctoral candidates I have often used the word ‘articulate’ to explain the requirement to identify where ‘new knowledge’ lies in doctoral study. But now I think this term does violence to the field of art and design and its involvement in the field of arts and health.

‘Articulate’ suggests a breaking apart. ‘New’ knowledge suggests something pristine. But the thinking that joins with things and making is not immaculate or rigorous but heterogeneous, emergent, situated and cloudy.

An articulated structure, since it remembers nothing, has nothing to forget. But the knot remembers everything, and has everything to forget. (Ingold 2015, 26)

Formulations of research excellence guided by the language of rigour overlook the already lived with and entangled.

Outside Castlefield Gallery in Manchester, at the opening of the exhibition ‘Twelve’ by Melanie Manchot, I met the commissioner of the work Mark Prest, founding director of PORE. Later we became research partners in a project called *Wonderland: the art of becoming human*.

Since 2010, the substance misuse agenda has moved away from harm-reduction towards recovery-focused outcomes, self-empowering the recovery community to become more active and visible. Addiction is a ‘feelings illness’ that rarely resolves itself with the end of active using – “from time to time, self-destruction still tries to seduce me”. The recovery movement espouses collective emancipatory principles – e.g. “I can’t, but together we can get well” and “FEAR – face everything and recover” (rather than “fuck everything and run”). (Funding bid excerpt, 2015.)

We wanted to establish new working partnerships with agencies and communities not previously involved in thinking about or experiencing the relationship between visual art, addiction and recovery. Participatory artistic processes and outputs would be produced in the process.⁵

I would ‘hold the space’ from the academic side and through my practice as a filmmaker, ‘think through making’ (Ravetz, 2011) about artistic research and trustworthiness.

I was reminded throughout the workshops led by Cristina Nuñez of how recording sound and image and registering temporality, movement and gesture are entangled with experience in a way that spans the linguistic, the imaginative and the bodily.

The atmosphere in the room moved, changed and was amplified or curtailed by what we were doing – how we connected with people, moved, contributed to ‘holding’ or breaking the space.

Affect travelled through the room and people picked up on feelings of openness, fear, connection and disconnection. Much of my awareness of what unfolded was not through the use of words but in exchanged looks, fluctuations, flows and stoppages of energy, gestures, visuals, sounds, and movements.

I noticed small nuances of behaviour, changes of tone and mood, visual and verbal cues about the group experience. I also

heard about political affiliations, felt how these were spoken, who did and did not feel able - or choose - to speak. And when I was aware of these things and it seemed appropriate I responded with a look, a movement, by staying silent, or by asking another question.

I may have become an academic in part to escape the daily need to feel. It is only slowly that I have understood that knowing from the inside of experience (of an artwork, of one's own life, alongside others' lives) demands connection with poesis, metaphor and feeling.

When the participants of *Wonderland* asked me how I was doing, and I said "I don't know, exhilarated, emotional and unsettled" they replied "You're in recovery, in the early stages..."

They saw signs of a phenomenon that I didn't grasp until much later when I read the book my daughter brought home about the children of alcoholics: that those affected by addiction, as friends and family of addicts, experience similar pathways to addicts.

I appreciated the inclusion implied in their words but I didn't understand the meaning for a long while, thinking that addiction must be more chaotic, more immediate and bring a different set of problems from the kind experienced by those of us on the receiving end of someone else's addiction. They knew to the contrary that I was inching my way towards an un-numbing and that this coming back to feeling was intensely unsettling and scary.

It is hard to remember that shame is not an entirely individual matter.

Perhaps it is a defiance of 'structural' shame that explains my pleasure in Mika Hannula's (2009) use of poetic rather than procedural terms to describe artistic research methods:

1) Like Trying to Run in Waist-High New Snow [...] 2) crossing a River by Feeling Each Stone [...] 3) Moving like Smugglers' Boats, moving quietly in the night, with no lights, almost colliding with one another, but never quite making contact.

Hannula's evocation works against the percepts guiding empirical research dominated by enlightenment metaphors

and techniques: shining a bright light on a pre-defined object of study, using typologies and categorical thinking, putting faith in analytical naming, walking the purposeful path of rigour. Hannula's phrases are about difficulty, a felt sense, semi-blindness, groping to find the way, following the ground (of practice), uncertainty. It captures artists' experiences of forming knowledge as something that is always fluctuating, a growing that can slip through the fingers, a mistake that can become an opening - experiences that are close to being canalized by a mono audit-focused research culture.

During the *Wonderland* research those who took the intensive workshops with Cristina told stories about their experiences and spoke of their gratitude for renewed connections to self and others brought about through their recovery journeys and the self-portrait experience. Much of the conversation supported Bruce Alexander's (2008) writing and thinking on the globalization of addiction in which he argues that addiction is not about individual weakness but is the result of many different kinds of dislocation (not necessarily geographical) which is reaching epidemic proportions at the current time due to an unfettered free-market.

Some said they had strengthened their recovery via new forms of social utopianism, an alternative to market driven individualism. Working with Cristina's self-portrait method, they experienced a heightened level of acceptance of themselves in ways they had not done beforehand. A group of women in the group reconvened afterwards and made naked self-portraits for inclusion in a book chapter (Ravetz, Jones and Gosnall 2017), setting up an on-going, self-determining, self-organised makers group.

But was this new knowledge as required by the definition of what research is and needs to do? Reported as 'what the participants came to understand' it has the look and feel of the categories 'impact and dissemination', reflected in the project's follow-on impact funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council. As with rigour, the idea of new knowledge, if what is meant by this is something calculably pristine, is a difficult fit for artistic research and other kindred oddkin epistemologies that decompose categories so that old and

new, known and not known are meshed and thought together. According to Leslie Jamison the new is a poor fit for recovery too where 'a story's sameness is precisely why it should be told.' (Jamison, 2018). The challenge is to show how methods of immanence and immersion with materials, things and people, turn something around in the composting process, make it differently comprehensible, and in so doing grow self-aware participatory socio-ecological connection, not only for those who participate directly, but, through gaps and gapes, for those around and after them.

As a child, I knew in an experiential and largely unspoken way that absorption in the processes and procedures of woodwork, cookery and sewing offered respite from dislocation, disconnection, loneliness and uncontrolled unpredictability. The rhythms of wood turning connected me to some 'bigger or other than human thing' and staved off some of the effects of my father's illness. I drew on the felt knowledge that the world feels alive, vital, rippling, unhuman, animist, terrifying, plural, and that part of this vitality involves decay and decomposition.

Sitting on a lawn on a hot day outside a university building during the Aberdeen University May festival where we were presenting various workshops, I discussed my problem with some of the more human-centric language of the *Wonderland* project with Michaela, a participant, a friend in recovery, possibly the person who came up with the project title, though there are different memories about this in the group. The subtitle of our project was inspired as I remembered it, by a phrase about recovery not instituting a state of normality but of humanity.

I'd been tripping up over the 'more human' bit a lot of late because of the implication that humans sit at the top and centre of planetary achievement. Michaela told me that afternoon that in fellowship literature, which she doesn't altogether go along with given its connotations of powerlessness, the person in recovery is advised not to go straight into a relationship with another human being after committing to change, but to begin by looking after a plant, then an animal, and so on.

There is a strong implication of hierarchy and evolutionary theory in this advice – if your plant dies because you didn't

devote yourself to it as you once devoted yourself to your substance or behavior of choice, then you're not ready to move up the evolutionary and spiritual ladder yet. But Michaela's reason for prioritizing her dogs and rabbits over many human relationships and her wariness of social institutions, was not, she said, because she was working her way 'up' to some higher order, but because she believes and experiences these beings to whom she devotes herself as centrally important and trustworthy. Her unsettling of her own and others' human-centric assumptions gives a clue to what the words 'becoming more human' mean to Michaela.

For her and some of the other recovery activists who were part of *Wonderland*, becoming more human was a synonym for becoming more connected with transformative versions of being human, more ecologically and sociologically just, and more vibrant and feeling. Michaela and I have talked in the past, as we did on that occasion, of a project with people in recovery that would explore their relationships with animals and plants. We wouldn't want it to proceed by cutting up those experiences into pieces of data. We'd want, as we did in *Wonderland*, to find ways to hold things together.

From the point of view of people in recovery who find themselves being treated as sub-human, as not worthy even of the nomination, becoming more human expresses the political and affective need to be treated as valuable, equal and without stigma. These terms of reconnection are of a different order from straight humanism I would suggest, despite the confusion of nominative language; becoming more human contains the seeds of being more than human-centred, tapping into the crucial experience of reconnection with 'something bigger' that is felt by many participants in arts and health delivery.

Research that would merit the accolade black gold would include in its criteria (if it had any), a willingness on the part of the researchers to overcome structural shame in order to bring the politics of feeling and knowing *with* things into dialogue with current research concepts that seem, unwittingly, to occlude such stirrings.

Funders want to grasp how less tested research practices such as artistic research deliver ‘new knowledge’ that can be effectively shared; many of those who work within and influence the arts and health field want evidence of art’s efficacy, its ability to bring comfort and save money by improving health and wellbeing. But artistic research must affirm its own experiential, material, oddkin epistemologies, speaking out for what is troubling, as much as for what is comforting and refusing to turn exclusively to discursive reasoning and empirical certainties when what is also needed is connection to liveness and feeling.

In market-driven educational institutions, where the anaesthetisation of feeling is evermore normalised, the recovery of felt experience through art connects to a fundamental human need for this liveness without deference to the dead hand of objectivity.

Poetic methodologies, ways of opening onto what Ingold calls ‘the dance of animacy’ are an urgent and necessary part of artistic research which sits at the potent edgeland between implicit felt sense and logical reason.

When story and narrative reasoning is disciplined by more dominant research paradigms there is pressure to conform.

Gold traditionally underwrites the gold standard because of its purity, rarity and paradoxically its malleability and perceptual trickery. Black gold combines the non-self-constancy of gold with another form of trickery – a seemingly worthless ubiquity. Black gold challenges the rigour concept in artistic research by figuring a multiplicity of life and death processes within generous latitude. Black gold opposes the consumption of lived experience in the form of neat and cleanly processed data. It reinstates the ubiquitous experiential as a basis for being knowledgeable, challenging the dismissal of this as ‘soft data’, as ‘the oft-told story’ as ‘merely anecdotal’.

Notes

- ¹ Oddkin is Donna Haraway’s term: “Making oddkin in this timeplace, this earth, is allying with both biogenetic relatives and very different other sorts of beings, living and dead, to craft enduring, generationally robust, sustaining collectives. *In Conversation, Donna Haraway with Thyrza Nichols Goodeve*. Last accessed 21/08/18 at www.brooklynrail.org/2017/12/art/DONNA-HARAWAY-with-Thyrza-Nichols-Goodeve
- ² REF is the United Kingdom’s current funding model for higher education institutions whereby submitted outputs are peer-reviewed against three criteria, originality, rigour and significance using categories from unclassified to four star.
- ³ See www.art.mmu.ac.uk/wonderland/
- ⁴ APPG/AHWB. *The Inquiry Report, Creative Health: The Arts for Health and Wellbeing*, was launched in Parliament on 19th July 2017 and at Manchester Metropolitan University on 21st July and is available: www.artshealthandwellbeing.org.uk/appg/inquiry. See also www.artshealthandwellbeing.org.uk/APPG
- ⁵ Ten participants, recruited through our networks and including some of the planning group, came to Manchester School of Art over several months to take part. The artist was Cristina Nuñez www.cristinanunez.com/the-self-portrait-experience1

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